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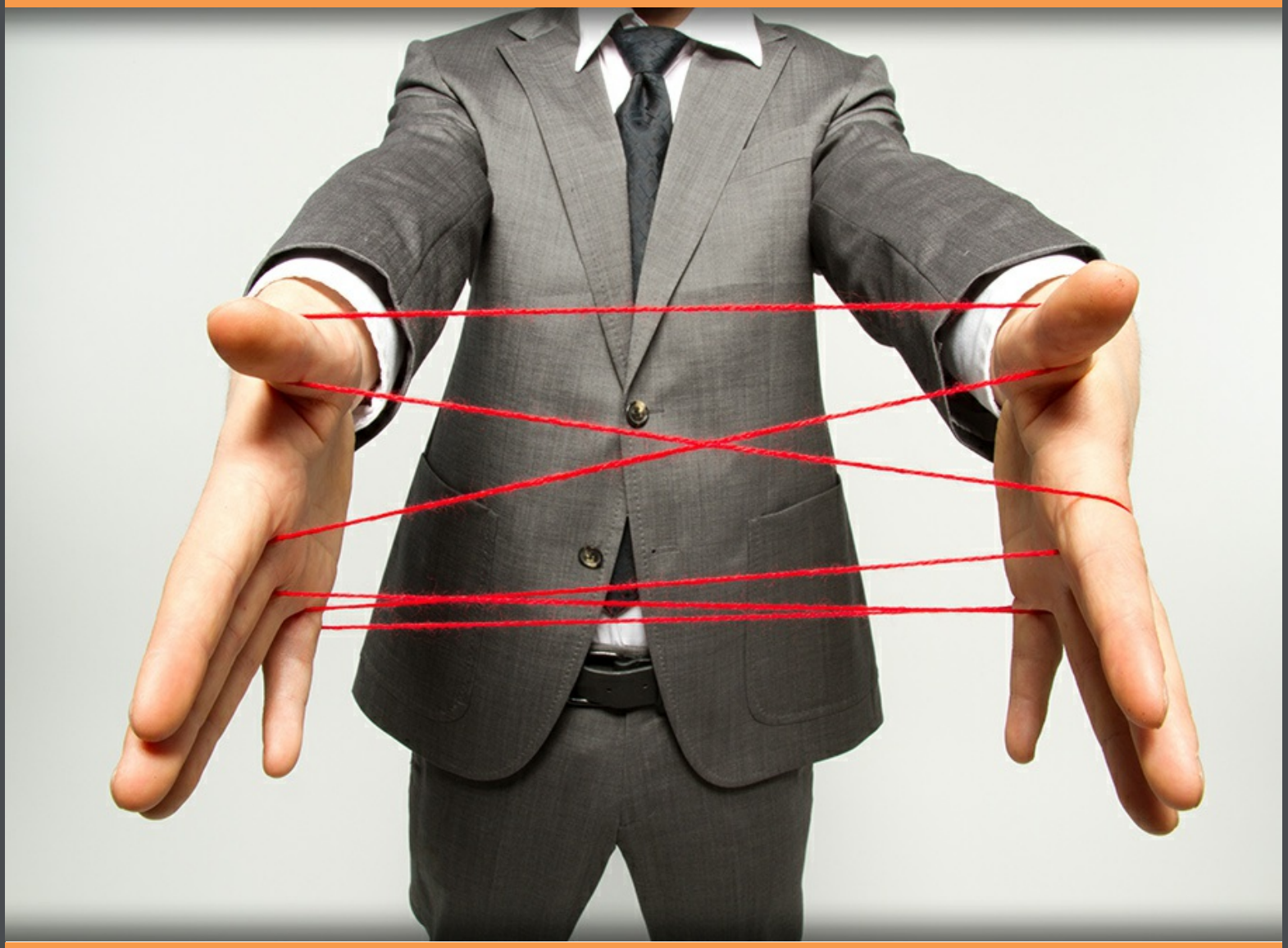
How to Overcome Procrastination

Paul Newton



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How to overcome Procrastination
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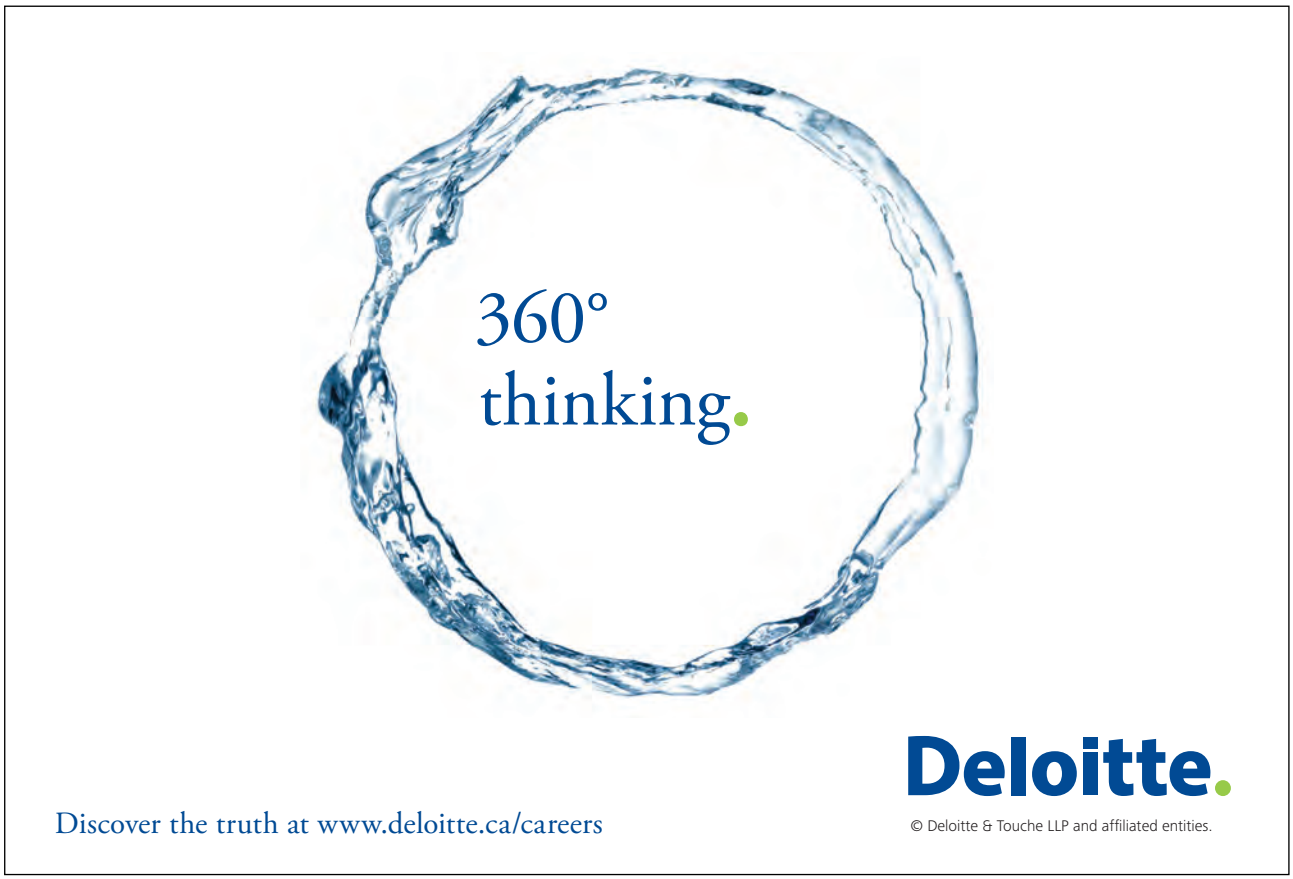

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Preface

Almost everyone is guilty of procrastination occasionally. High priority tasks are usually difficult or time consuming and it is often easier to find straightforward, less important tasks to do instead. This eBook is a practical guide to overcoming your own tendency to procrastinate and to help your team members to overcome theirs.

You will learn:

- The psychological basis of procrastination and why it is so difficult to overcome.
- Why quick fix solutions to this problem never work.
- To identify the seven triggers that cause people to put off important tasks.
- To isolate the origin of procrastination on a case-by-case basis.
- Practical and useable tactics to beat this productivity killer.

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1 Introduction

Most people at some time or another will have found themselves putting off starting a task, even though they feel uncomfortable about doing so. This is known as procrastination, which can be defined as:

> *'The act of replacing high-priority actions with tasks of lower priority, or doing something from which one derives enjoyment, and thus putting off important tasks to a later time.'*

Or

> *'To voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay.'*

This putting off of important tasks results in a sense of guilt that causes a loss of motivation and personal productivity. It can also lead to stress as a result of disapproval for not meeting commitments.

Almost everyone is guilty of procrastination occasionally. High-priority tasks are usually difficult or time-consuming and it is often easier to find simpler, less important tasks to do instead. Sometimes delaying a high-priority task is completely justified because you don't have all of the information that you need or you feel that the task may be given a lower priority as circumstances change.

If you feel uncomfortable justifying to yourself why you are not getting on with a particular task then you need to accept that you are probably guilty of procrastination. This eBook is designed to help you understand the problem better and learn some successful ways of dealing with it.

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Even if you don't suffer from this problem yourself, it is possible that someone in your team does and you may be able to help him or her to overcome it.

If you want to improve your personal productivity, you will need to identify the types of job you put off and the reasons and excuses you give yourself.

Many people admit to putting off jobs because: they find the job daunting or unpleasant, or they hope that the job will somehow go away, or they just don't know where to start. They may justify this by finding routine tasks to do instead. Alternatively, they may wait until the pressure is really on before starting to take appropriate action.

Putting off jobs we dislike doing is a common trait. Unfortunately, most jobs that are put off don't go away – they remain waiting to be done, and they tend to stay at the back of our minds, often causing feelings of guilt and acting as a distraction.

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Keep changing it to look busy
Fill it with low importance items
Leave off an important task
Help others with simpler tasks
TO DO List bad habits

Another disadvantage of this type of behavior is that it tends to lead to an ever-increasing number of jobs that remain outstanding. This growing list becomes ever more daunting and it then becomes more and more difficult to make a start on any of them.

If you find yourself using your 'To Do' list in the following ways you are delaying tasks and causing yourself unnecessary guilt and stress by doing so. You can also assess how much you procrastinate when making decisions by looking at how many of the common behaviors you exhibit.

- Repeatedly handling papers rather than deal with it first time.
- Keep on re-reading emails to put of deciding if you should delete / file / respond.
- Distract yourself by leaving your desk rather than start on high-level task.
- Postpone working on high-level task until you 'Feel like it!'
- Start work on high-level task at last minute because you work better under pressure.

The acid test is how your morale, motivation, and personal productivity are affected by putting off a particular task. If you are feeling guilty or embarrassed about your behavior then you need to understand why you are procrastinating as a first step to overcoming this tendency.

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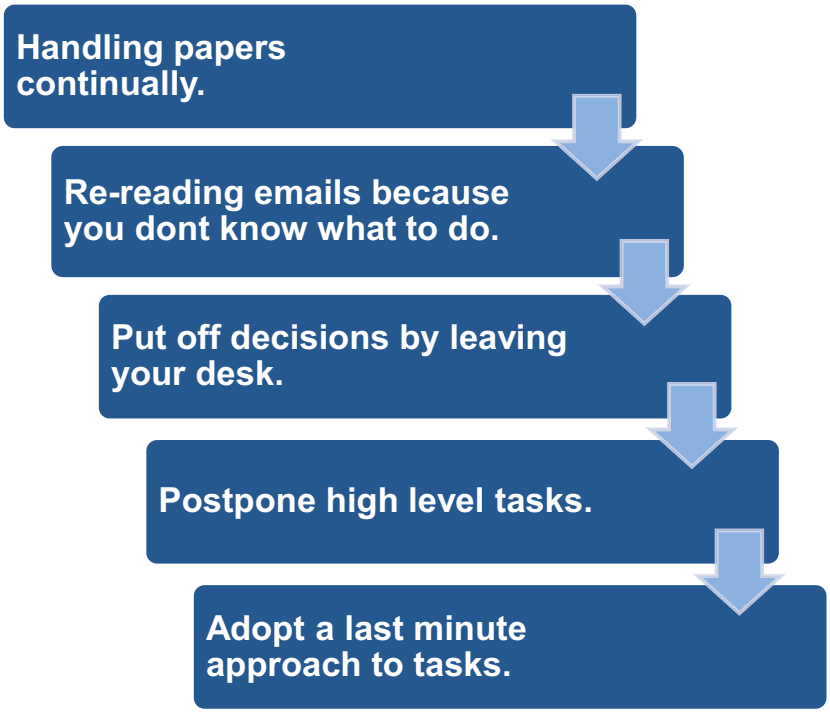
If you keep a record of how you spend your day, you can now look back at it and see if you can identify any tasks that you normally have difficulty starting or sticking at. Once you recognize the types of task that cause you to procrastinate, you can try to manage and eliminate this behavior.

One thing that you will need to guard against is the tendency to justify procrastination on the basis that you're just putting a job off until you're 'in the right mood' to do it. Your ability to be successful at any task is not dependent upon your mood. There are occasions when you will have to do something you don't like, even if you don't feel like it – it is just essential that the task is completed. That doesn't mean your results are going to be of a lesser quality, or that the task will be a failure. It just means that in this instance your motivation comes after you've started work on something.


Handling papers continually.
Re-reading emails because you dont know what to do.
Put off decisions by leaving your desk.
Postpone high level tasks.
Adopt a last minute approach to tasks.

Sometimes, working on a project helps bring about a change in our mood. We can't always expect to be in the right mood all the time. Neither should you expect to be able to work on things in life only when you're in the right mood. These are just elaborate excuses we make up to reinforce our procrastinating behavior.

Psychologists believe that the tendency to put off certain types of activity even when we know it is not in our long-term interests has its roots in behavioral evolution. The theory is that early humans gained more benefit by saving the energy needed to implement long-term plans in favor of saving it for dealing with immediate problems. In other words:

> *Taking time to think about longer-term plans could be a distraction from short-term survival.*

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This makes it difficult for abstract motivations to overcome avoidance of tasks that do not give us short-term pleasure. Whilst this hypothesis cannot be proven, it is tempting to believe that the tendency to procrastinate must have some fundamental reason for being so powerful and widespread.

Even if this behavior does have its roots in evolution, it has certainly outlived its usefulness in the modern workplace. As a manager you will have many important tasks that you need to complete. There may be no short-term payoff for you, but their importance as part of the overall success of your organization makes them essential to complete. The issue for you is how to avoid falling into the numerous ways and behaviors we can adopt to 'put off' performing such tasks.

Overcoming procrastination is extraordinarily difficult and involves first coming to terms with and recognizing the fact that this is the way you behave and that it is causing you problems with your productivity. Then you need to re-educate your own thinking and attitude towards these tasks.

Generally speaking, procrastination is something that will have been part of an individual's make-up for a large part of their life and may date back to their school days. For this reason, they will usually have developed coping responses to it.

The strategies and tactics that are most frequently used are of an emotional or avoidant orientation. They are designed to reduce your feelings of guilt and stress associated with putting off important personal goals.

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You should ask yourself if you have ever used any of the following to justify your own behavior:

Absenteeism: you avoid going to the location where the task takes place, or meeting with the required person or persons needed to perform the task. This is usually achieved by taking sick days or vacation time. You can also avoid visiting the location or not calling the required person.

Trivializing the task: you make the task appear less important in some way. For example,

'They've managed without it up to now, how important can it be?'

Blaming external factors: you use the rationalization that you are unable to start on the task due to an issue or information required from an external force, which is beyond your control. For example,

'I need finance to send me those figures before I can even make a start.'

Assigning spurious priority to another task: pretending to yourself that the task you are working on is in fact more important than the task you are putting off. You can also persuade yourself that a task others keep distracting you with is more urgent than the one you are procrastinating over.

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Distracting yourself with routine or inconsequential work: your attention is diverted from the outstanding task by immersion in other work. Your reasoning is that you'll '*just finish these things off*' or *'I'll just tidy these things up first'* and then you'll give your attention to that task. For example,

Responding to routine emails or chatting to other team members etc.

Pretending that you will benefit from not starting: convincing yourself that you will perform the task better if you leave it until the last minute. For example

'I always do this sort of thing better when I'm under stress.'

Remember, procrastination is usually a behavior that has developed over a long period of time.

As such, you will find it hard to resist adopting quick-fix solutions, justifying to yourself that when this situation arises again you'll adopt the right approach and not put off this task. It is not just a matter of simply trying to apply more and more willpower to overcome procrastination – that seldom works?

You have to re-learn how to prioritize your work and make yourself look at the 'whole' picture not just your role's perspective. This readjustment is often a steep learning curve if you have just recently been promoted to a managerial position.

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If you find yourself behaving in any of the ways just mentioned the best method to incorporate into your work practices is to identify and analyze the environmental and mental barriers that are preventing you from starting the task at hand.

Key Points

- Continually putting off important tasks is called 'procrastination.' It results in a sense of guilt that causes a loss of motivation and personal productivity.
- Almost everyone is guilty of procrastination occasionally. High-priority tasks are usually difficult or time-consuming and it is often simpler to find easier, less important tasks to do instead.
- Procrastination is always easy to justify, which can make it difficult to identify and overcome.
- Quick-fix solutions seldom work. The best solution is to take the time to understand what it is that makes you procrastinate and then use this knowledge to tackle one important task at a time.

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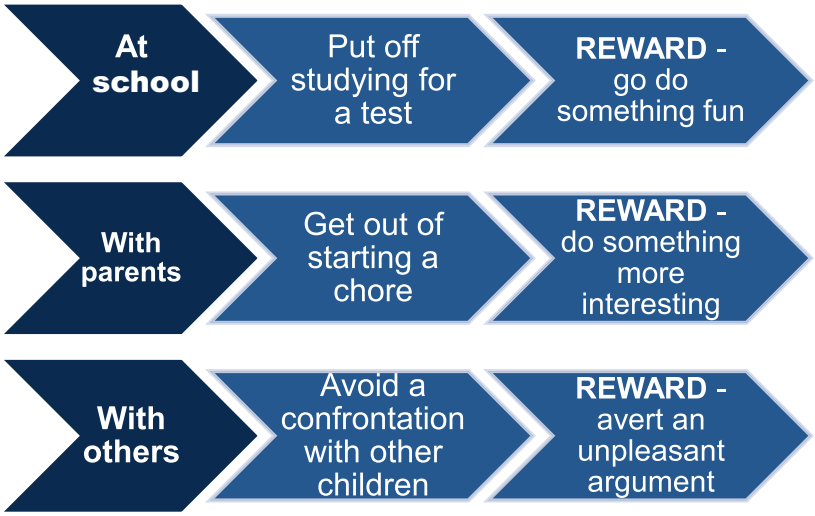
2 Why People Procrastinate

The reason that people procrastinate is quite simple. It provides an instant reward in the shape of a relief from immediate stress. In other words, by not starting a task that you know will prove stressful, you feel a sense of relief that, though temporary, is nonetheless very real and satisfying.

Procrastination acts as a reward because it takes one away from something unpleasant or threatening.

It is a behavior that often begins quite early in life; and because you are 'rewarded' by behaving in this way it becomes a habit, which follows you from childhood, through your teenage years, and into your working life.

In all of these cases, your reward was immediate and made you feel good, so you continue to behave in the same way when confronted with an unpleasant or threatening situation. Here are just a few examples you may have adopted yourself!


At school
Put off studying for a test
REWARD - go do something fun
With parents
Get out of starting a chore
REWARD - do something more interesting
With others
Avoid a confrontation with other children
REWARD - avert an unpleasant argument

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In many cases the reward will be temporary and you will still have to confront the thing you are trying to avoid, *but not always*.

Occasionally you will find that the test was canceled, parents did the chore themselves or you were excused for some other reason. In the case of the confrontation, it never happened because the next time you saw the person they had forgotten about it, or it just didn't seem that important any more.

The fact is that avoiding dealing with something you don't want to do straightaway can be a rewarding strategy, something that is not often acknowledged. This is one of the reasons why it can become such an ingrained behavior.

The immediate 'sense of relief' reward is the main reason why people procrastinate. However, knowing this is not actually much help unless you are able to get to the root of why there is a 'sense of relief' associated with not starting a particular type of task.

You should think of this reward as a symptom rather than an underlying cause. This reward will always be present, it will always be more immediately gratifying not to do a particular piece of work because you will always be able to find something more enjoyable to do in the short term. The trick is to look beyond this, to identify the types of task that you are tempted to avoid and to devise strategies for overcoming the procrastination reflex.

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3 Understanding the Triggers for Procrastination

There are seven common triggers that lead people to put off certain tasks and these are listed below. Some tasks may encompass more than one of these triggers, which can make it difficult to isolate the reason for procrastination.

Understanding the triggers for procrastination should help you to pin down why you are avoiding certain types of task, which is the first step to regaining control over this destructive behavior. Even if none of the following seem to fit your exact situation, they may help you to confront and clarify your own feelings about the tasks that you are avoiding.

The next part of this eBook considers each of these triggers in turn. Rather than simply reading through the list, you should think of situations where putting off a task has caused, or is causing you, a problem. Write down the name of these tasks in a grid as shown.

There is no reason to show the completed grid to anyone else, so be honest with yourself about your reasons even if they don't show you in your best light. It is important that the grid is an accurate reflection of how you feel about each task otherwise you will be wasting your time with this exercise.

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Trigger	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Task 1							
Task 2							
Task 3							
Task 4							
Task 5							
Task 6							

You can then think about each of the tasks in turn in relation to the possible triggers shown as numbers in the top row of the table. For each trigger there are suggested questions to ask yourself to ascertain if the particular trigger is why you are putting off performing the task.

If you recognize that a particular trigger is a factor in preventing you from starting the task, then mark it in the grid. If you really want to understand why you procrastinate then you need to take this exercise seriously, which means taking the time to think about each task carefully.

1) **The Task Appears Boring or Pointless**
   Do you feel that the task is not using your potential?
   Do you feel that the task is beneath your skill level?
   Do you feel that the output from the task will not be acted on?
   Do you feel that the task is being done for no good reason?
   Do you feel that you've done this task over and over again and have lost interest in it?

2) **The Task Involves a Possible Confrontation**
   Does the task involve a potential confrontation with:
   - a co-worker?
   - a customer?
   - a supplier?

3) **You Resent Being Given Responsibility for the Task**
   Do you feel that the task should be the responsibility of someone else?
   Is the task commensurate with your job title and job description?
   Do you feel that you are not being properly rewarded for the responsibility that goes with the task?

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4) **The Task Appears Overwhelming**

Do you feel that you don't have:

- sufficient time to complete the task?
- sufficient training to complete it?
- enough experience to complete it?

5) **You Don't Know How to Proceed**

Do you feel that you could start if you had a clearly defined first stage?

Do you feel unclear about the expected outcome?

Are you unsure of exactly what is required to perform the task?

6) **You are Afraid of Failure**

Do you feel that you will be judged by:

- your boss on the outcome of this particular task?
- your peers on the outcome of this particular task?

Do you feel that there is a significant chance you will fail to achieve what is expected?

Do you feel that factors beyond your control are likely to cause you to fail?

7) **You are Afraid of Success**

If you complete the task successfully, do you feel that:

- you will be 'rewarded' with something even more difficult?
- you will be moved to another team or department?
- you will be promoted?
- you will alienate your peers?
- successful completion will have a negative impact on other people?

After working through the tasks in the table and considering each in turn, you should have a grid that looks something like the one below. Each task will have one or more crosses against it that represent your view of that task.

Trigger	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Task 1		X	X			X	
Task 2		X	X			X	
Task 3			X			X	
Task 4		X	X				
Task 5		X	X			X	
Task 6							

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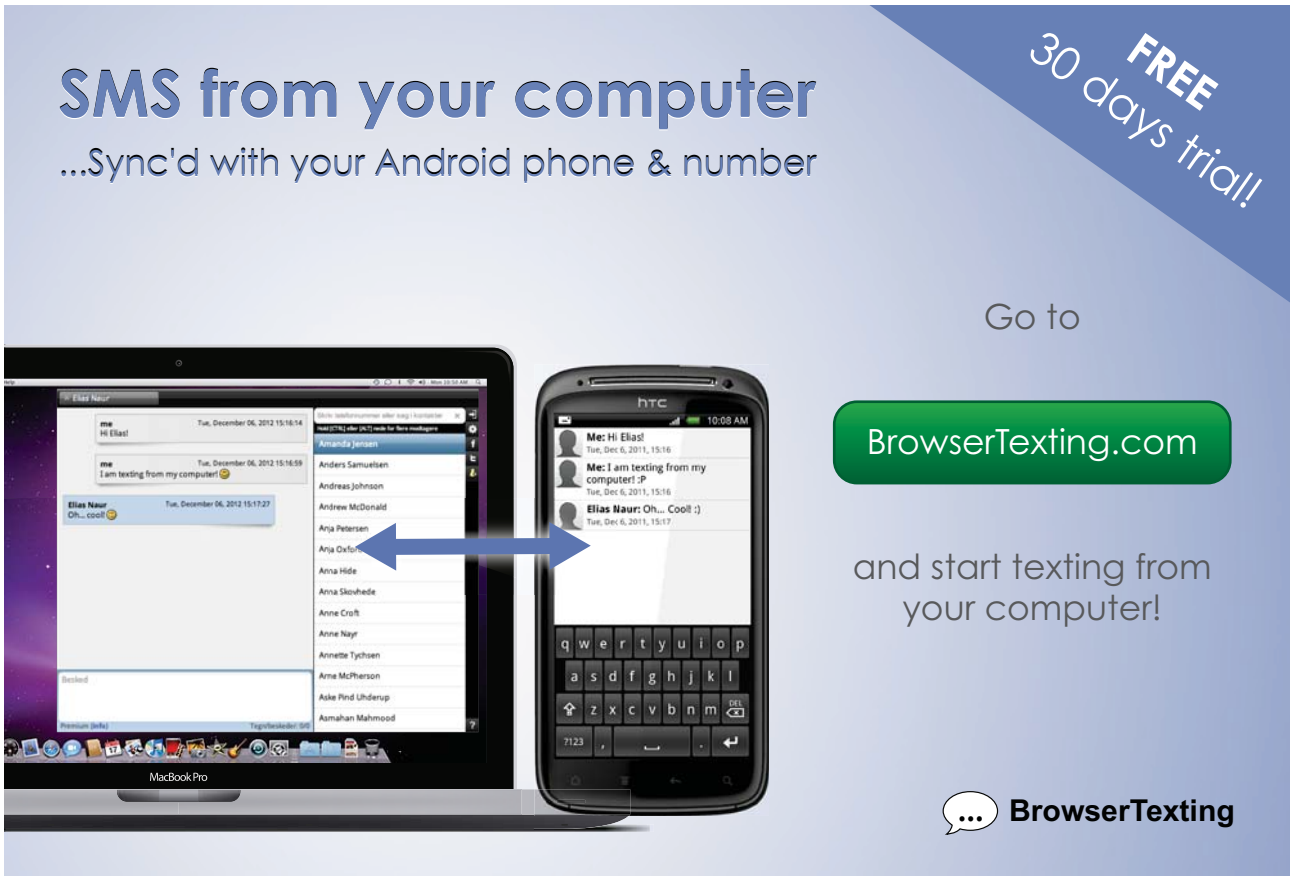
Most people find that the crosses predominate ina one or two areas and these are the ones that you need to attend to if you are going to overcome your problem with procrastination.

In this example, three of the five tasks are being put off because:

- the person fears confrontation,
- resents being given responsibility for the task, and
- fears failing at it.

There may be some cause and effect at work here. For example it is quite possible that the fear of confrontation is leading to both the feeling of resentment and the fear of failure. In which case the fear of confrontation is the cause and the feelings of resentment and fear of failure are symptoms of the fact that this person is very uncomfortable with confrontation.

This example begs the question: Would the person feel resentment or fear of failure in the absence of their main concern, which is fear of confrontation? It is possible to imagine circumstances where they would not.



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For example:

- If they were confident in their ability to handle confrontation well, then they probably would not object to being asked to do the task and they would perhaps feel as though they could complete it successfully.
- On the other hand, the feeling of resentment might be perfectly justified, if the task does not fall within their job description or accepted duties.
- Similarly, the fear of failure might be justified if there is a lot at stake and they are being held solely responsible for the outcome.

The point of completing your own version of the grid is that it will enable you to see if there are any patterns in your own behavior. The reasons for procrastination are often complex and interdependent and it is only by imposing some structure on them that you will be able to get to the root cause.

The next step is to consider each of these areas in turn. If you have managed to identify an area that is of particular concern to you then you should work on this area in isolation. As detailed earlier, procrastination is usually an ingrained behavior that is very difficult to overcome.

You will have far more chance of success if you concentrate on one area at a time and you may find that most of your procrastination problems have one root cause.

Key Points

- Procrastination is not a character flaw.
- It is a learned behavior that has paid dividends in the past.
- Avoiding dealing with something you don't want to do straightaway can be a rewarding strategy, even if only in the short term.
- There are seven common triggers that lead people to put off certain tasks.
- Try to identify the ones that affect you the most. Procrastination problems often have one root cause.

3.1 The Task Appears Boring or Pointless

This trigger plays a role in many instances of procrastination and is often the root cause of other triggers like resentment or feeling overwhelmed. After all it is only natural to feel angry about being asked to do something that you feel is boring or pointless. Similarly, if you believe that your usual level of energy and motivation will be sapped by having to do something boring then you may feel that you will never be able to complete it.

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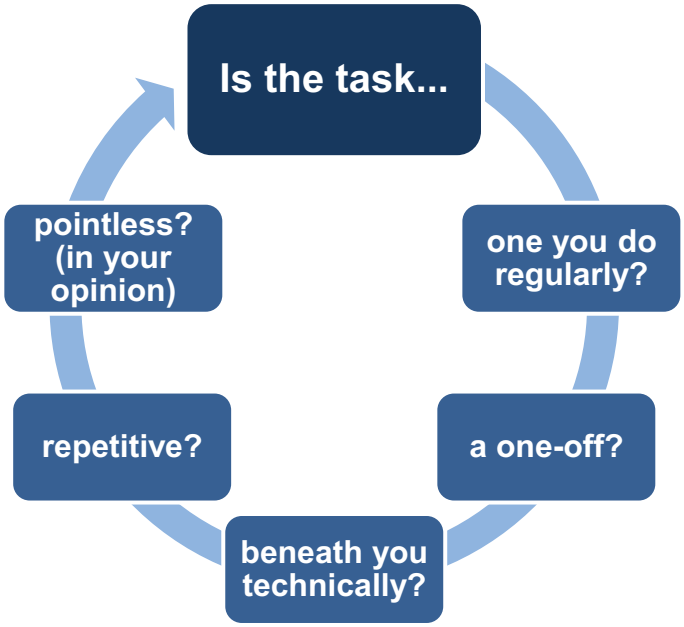

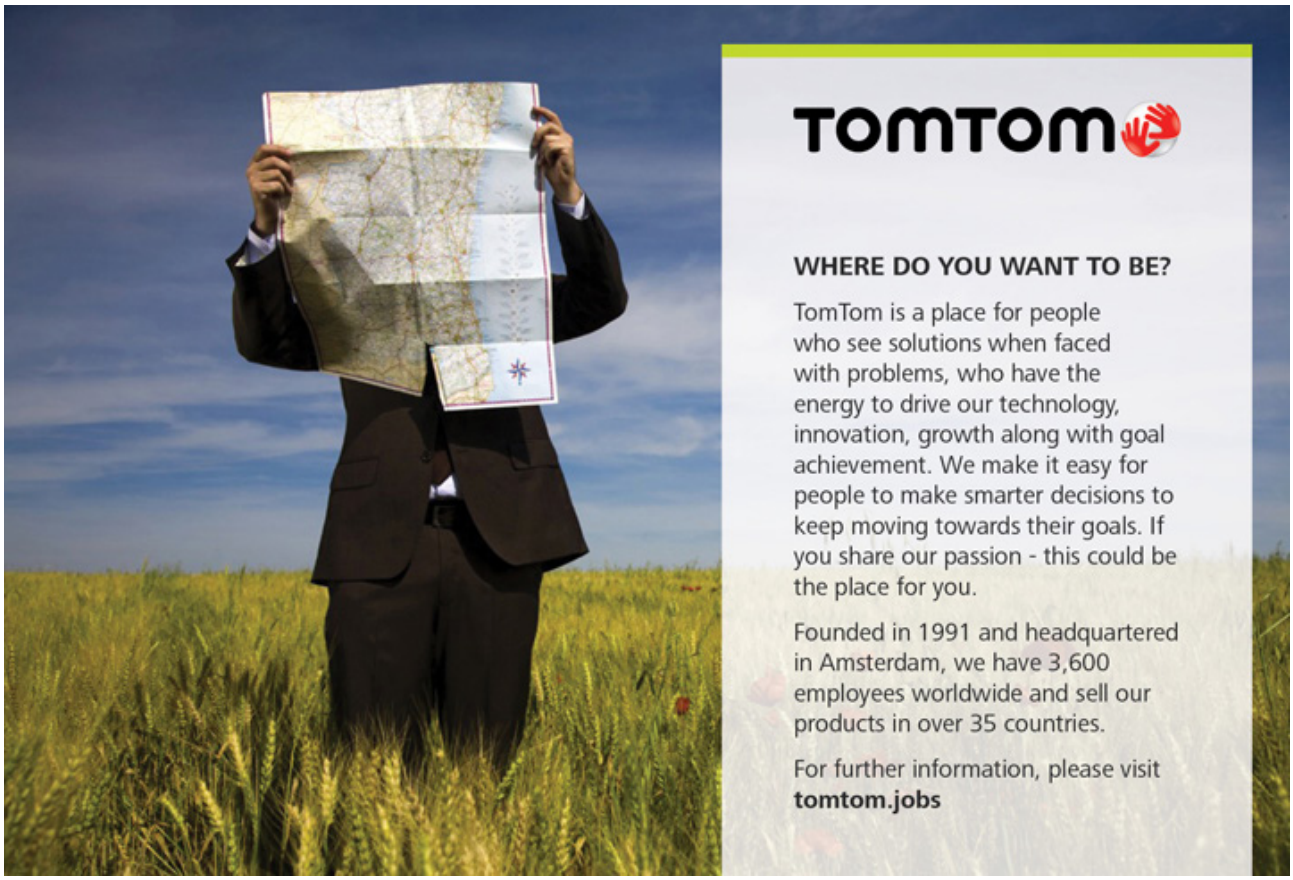
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There are several things that you need to ask yourself with regard to this particular trigger. Think about one particular task that you have identified and ask yourself the following questions:

Is the task something that you have to do regularly?
If the task is something that is a regular part of your job then it is worth considering some other options as detailed below.

Is the task a one-off?
If the task is a one-off then you might be better off just getting on and doing it as it could be difficult to justify the time and effort needed to assign it to someone else or to automate it.

Is the task beneath your technical ability?
If so, then should you be doing it? Is this a task you can delegate? Presumably the organization would prefer to pay you for work that couldn't be done more cheaply by someone else. Can you make a case to your boss that you shouldn't be doing this work as it represents poor value for money and the organization would benefit if you spent more time on tasks commensurate with your skill level?

Is the task repetitive?
If the task is repetitive then can it be automated in any way? Is there a case for developing a macro or computer program to do it? Would it be possible for you to script the task and outsource it? Is this a task you can delegate? Can you put a case to your boss that it makes financial sense to do this type of task in some other way?

Do you feel that the task is pointless?
If the task really is pointless then you should bring this up with your boss. It is not unknown for some jobs to be done a certain way, or done at all, long after they cease to be useful or necessary.

If you think that the organization is wasting money by doing something that has outlived its usefulness or which could be done differently then you should discuss this with your boss. You may discover either that the output from the task is used in some way that you are not aware of or that you don't need to do it anymore.

If all of the above strategies fail and you are stuck with a task you find boring, then the best approach is to break it up into smaller chunks and treat each one as a task in itself. You can then discipline yourself to tackle the work in ten or twenty minute sessions and intersperse it with more interesting things.

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It can be a good idea to schedule these for times of the day when you are not at your most creative and to treat them as a respite from more demanding work.

These types of task are notorious for leaching away motivation the longer they remain undone as they tend to accumulate and you may find yourself facing a backlog of boring work that feels overwhelming. If these types of task form a significant part of your working day then you need to face up to the fact that you will need a strategy to deal with them otherwise your personal productivity, reputation, and career prospects may all suffer.

However tempting it may be to assume that the situation will sort itself out, it probably won't and any effort that you put in to dealing with it will be worthwhile.

Key Points

- Tasks that appear boring or pointless are easy to keep putting off.
- Try to identify whether the task really needs to be done. If it does, can it be done another way or can someone else do it?
- Schedule boring tasks for times of the day when you are not at your most creative. Treat them as a respite from more demanding work.
- Break boring tasks up into smaller chunks and treat each one as a task in itself.

3.2 The Task Involves a Possible Confrontation

The definition of 'a confrontation' is something that is very personal to an individual.

- At one extreme, people who are resilient may only consider an interaction to be confrontational if it involves a serious quarrel complete with raised voices and high drama.
- At the other extreme, someone who is sensitive may consider the passive-aggressive response of a subordinate to have been a confrontation. There may have been no outward sign of disagreement but they were left with the feeling that the subordinate just didn't want to hear what they had to say.

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People have a wide range of tolerance to levels of confrontation and to different types of confrontation. For example, some people find it much easier to deal with open confrontation in the form of an argument than with sulky passive-aggressive behavior.

Others find the opposite. Some people will quite happily fight their corner with someone at the same level in the organization but will feel unable to do anything except agree with their boss even though they fundamentally oppose his or her point of view.

As an individual, you will have your own particular feelings about what constitutes a confrontation for you. This will vary according to the type and nature of the confrontation you face, or anticipate facing by performing a particular task

If something feels like a confrontation to you, then it is a confrontation even if other people you know would not describe it as such. In addition, some people are so averse to confrontation that they will avoid situations where a confrontation is even a remote possibility.

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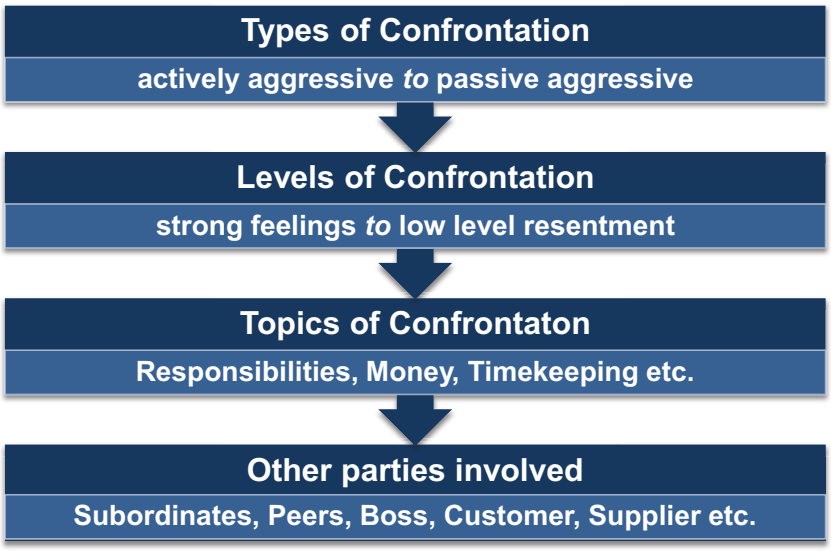
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actively aggressive to passive aggressive
Levels of Confrontation
strong feelings to low level resentment
Topics of Confrontaton
Responsibilities, Money, Timekeeping etc.
Other parties involved
Subordinates, Peers, Boss, Customer, Supplier etc.

All of this means that you need to consider very carefully if you are avoiding your responsibilities because of your own apprehension about a possible confrontation. For example:

- Do you avoid asking others for input or cooperation in case they resent it?
- Do you avoid returning calls from suppliers or customers in case there is a problem?
- Do you ignore poor timekeeping by others even though it inconveniences you?
- Do you agree with your boss even when you feel that they are wrong?
- Do you feel reluctant to offer your point of view at meetings?

It is tempting to deny that you are uncomfortable with confrontation so as to avoid appearing 'weak,' both to others and to yourself. However, the reasons for your behaviors are likely to be deep-seated and may date back to formative experiences and relationships in your childhood.

Consequently they are not something that can be overcome without considerable effort and determination. You may want to seek out a mentor to help you identify how best to relearn the behaviors that are causing you this problem.

The good news is that confrontation in the workplace is usually far less 'personal' than the experiences that have led to this aversion to conflict becoming part of your psyche. It also tends to be more predictable, less intense and quickly forgotten as people get on with their day-to-day work. For all of these reasons, it will probably prove to be easier to deal with than you think, provided that you tackle it in the right way.

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Overcoming your fear of confrontation is dealt with in depth in the relevant eBook available from this website.

Key Points

- Very few people enjoy confrontation and it is a major reason for avoiding certain tasks.
- The threshold for confrontation is highly personal and you should be honest with yourself about where yours lies.
- If you feel as though your fear of confrontation is making you put tasks off then you may need to take action to overcome it.

3.3 You Resent Being Given Responsibility for the Task

This is often a symptom rather than a root cause of procrastination. If you feel that the task is boring, pointless, unpleasant, overwhelming, or unclear, or you are afraid of failing at it, then you would naturally resent being given responsibility for it.

However, if the task is none of these things and you still resent being given it, then this can become a trigger for not getting on with it. This is a natural passive-aggressive response to feeling aggrieved but having no other means of making your feelings known.

This suggests that either you are being unrealistic about what your job actually involves and you need to come to terms with it, or the work really has been unfairly dumped on you and you can't see any way to get out of doing it.

In either case, there is no easy solution although if you have been given work that you are not really responsible for then you need to consider why this has happened. Have you done or said anything that may have led others to think that you're happy to take the task on?

Even if you can't get out of doing the task can you prevent the responsibility for this type of work being given to you in the future? Is this something you can bring up with your boss in your next appraisal meeting? Is the task suitable for you to delegate to one of your team? The latter may mean you having to perform the task whilst offering someone else the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge.

Key Points

- Resentment is often a symptom rather than a root cause of procrastination.
- Are you being realistic about the responsibilities of your job?
- Have you done or said anything that may have led others to think that you're happy to take the task on?

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3.4 The Task Appears Overwhelming

This trigger is another often-given reason for not starting a task. The thought process usually runs something like this:

> *That sounds like a lot of work. In fact I don't think I will be able to cope with it.*
> *What if it turns out to be even worse than it sounds?*
> *I can't bear to even think about it. I'll just ignore it and hopefully it will go away.*

Unfortunately, these tasks seldom go away by themselves and the longer you leave it before taking action the worse the situation gets. Firstly, because the task is sitting there at the back of your mind slowly sapping your mental energy as you worry about it.

Secondly, because if it does turn out to be more work than you can cope with then someone, ideally your boss, needs to know this in order to do something about it. If this is the case then your boss would be justified in being annoyed that you had not brought the situation to his or her attention as soon as you could.

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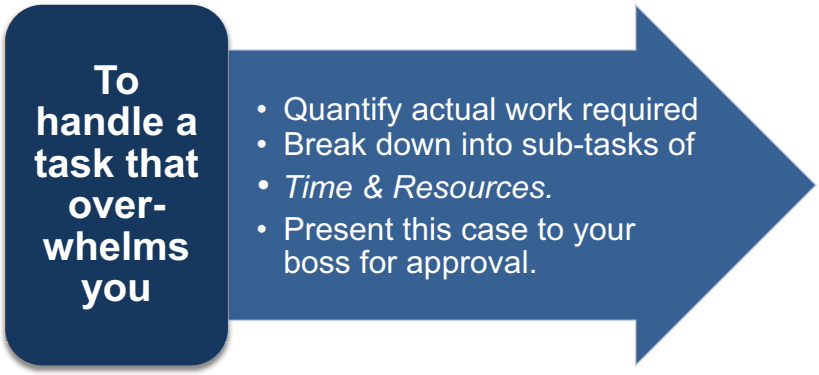
To handle a task that over-whelms you
• Quantify actual work required
• Break down into sub-tasks of
• *Time & Resources.*
• Present this case to your boss for approval.

The best way to deal with jobs like this is to assume that you are right – it really is an impossible task for you to do with the time and resources available. You need to sit down with the intention of quantifying the work involved so you can prove this to your boss.

The act of putting together a case to present to your boss will force you to plan how the task can be broken into sub-tasks and then to assign time and resource requirements to each. Doing this will mean that you have to question many of your initial assumptions and be realistic about what each stage will actually involve.

The end result will be a plan detailing the individual stages and a time requirement for each that you feel is accurate and that you could defend if your boss questioned it.

If it turns out that you really have been given a job that is impossible to complete with the time and resources you have available, then all you need to do is to approach your boss and make your case. Quite often, however, you will realize that the task is not as much work as you thought it was and you now have a plan for doing it in smaller chunks, each with an associated timeframe.

Either outcome is preferable to the initial situation where you were hoping that the task would just go away whilst knowing that this was very unlikely to happen. The longer you leave addressing the task the narrower your options are for resolving the problem.

With this approach, you are to some extent 'fooling yourself' into taking a first step to tackle something that you otherwise could not start. Often just taking the first step, regardless of how small, can serve as an inducement and thus a motivator for further action.

One of the reasons why people feel overwhelmed is because there is something missing that they need to complete the task but they are unable to articulate precisely what it is without thinking about the task in detail.

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However, they can't bring themselves to think about the task in detail because it appears overwhelming and it is much easier to procrastinate. This is a so-called 'catch-22' scenario and the approach detailed above can help to break it.

One result of the plan you have developed should be a list of any resources you need, and it may be that there is something in this list that represents the 'missing' resource. If so, then you can use your plan to approach your boss in order to secure it.

Key Points

- Overwhelming tasks do not just go away by themselves.
- Quantify the time and resources needed to complete the task. Do this in enough detail that you would be happy to present the figures to your boss.
- If the task really is beyond you, then approach your boss straightaway and work out a solution.
- Quite often, you will realize that the task is not as much work as you thought it would be and you now have a plan for doing it in smaller chunks.

3.5 You Don't Know How to Proceed

This is another very common trigger, particularly when there are two or more equally valid approaches to the task. It could be that:

- you don't feel you have the authority to make this fundamental decision;
- you don't have the information you need to make it; or
- you simply can't decide on the 'best' course of action.

In the first two cases it is up to you to get the authority or the information. The third case is more common and more difficult. Remember, the key word here is 'best.' It probably doesn't matter if you don't pick the 'best' way forward as long as you do actually move forward towards your goal.

Very often the best way of achieving something simply cannot be known in advance; it may even be the first time this task has been performed in your organization. In either case you will often arrive at the final solution in an indirect way.

Whether you feel comfortable with this approach will depend on the culture within your organization and it may be necessary to cover yourself by asking for input from your boss or your peers. If you do this then it is always best to put forward the most likely options with a list of the pros and cons of each.

The opposite is also true and sometimes the only way to discover that something won't work is to try it and see. This may be due to new circumstances surrounding the task or external factors that have altered the environment in which the task will be performed.

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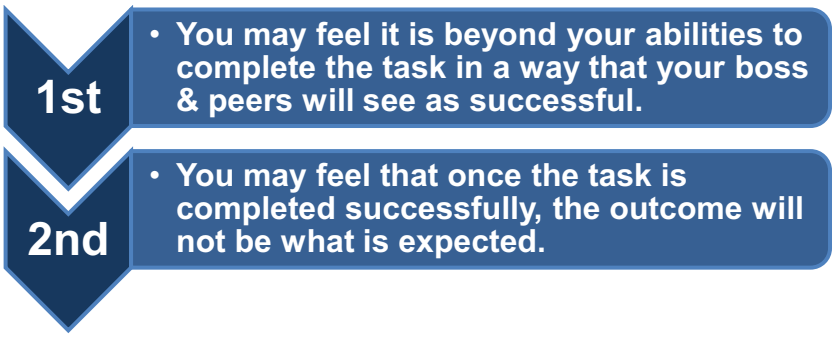
Key Points

- Not knowing how to begin a task is a common trigger for procrastination.
- Detail the most likely options with a list of the pros and cons of each and then approach your boss for his or her input.

3.6 You Are Afraid of Failure

The reason for your fear of failure can be broken down into two separate areas of your feelings.


1st
• You may feel it is beyond your abilities to complete the task in a way that your boss & peers will see as successful.
2nd
• You may feel that once the task is completed successfully, the outcome will not be what is expected.

These are quite different things. In the first case, it is your reservations about your own abilities that is causing you concern. In the second case it is the wisdom of undertaking the task at all. In both of these cases your tendency to procrastinate is a result of trying to retain a positive self-image by not being associated with failure.

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The second case is probably the easiest to deal with in that all you need to do is agree with the stakeholders what you are being asked to deliver and to make sure that they are aware of any reservations you may have. It is important not to phrase your concerns in a negative way but only to appear to seek clarification of what you are being asked to do.

If you are still worried, then make sure that all of your concerns are detailed in writing, for example in emails, and keep these to cover yourself in case of recriminations in the future. By keeping the communications of your progress with the task in the forefront of these people's minds you will avoid any unexpected surprises.

If your reservations and concerns are to do with your own abilities then you should think carefully about what exactly is at the root of your fear. It could be that one of the other triggers is the primary cause.

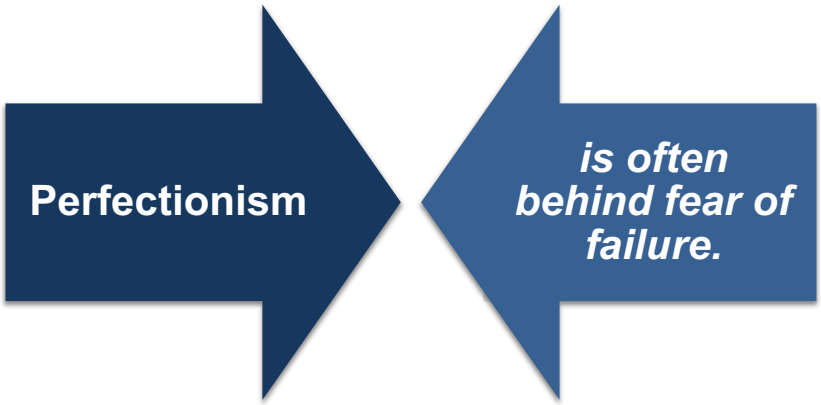
For example:

> The task may appear overwhelming and you may feel that failure is inevitable.
> In which case the *fear of failure* is really a symptom rather than a cause.

When fear of failure is a trigger for procrastination then this is usually a result of perfectionism on the part of the procrastinator. Perfectionism can be defined as:

> *'A propensity for being displeased with anything that is not perfect or does not meet extremely high standards.'*

It is characterized by feelings that whatever you achieve it is never good enough because it falls short of perfection.



Perfectionism is often set in motion early in life by parents and older siblings, particularly if there is a history of high academic achievement in the family.

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Perfectionists set themselves unreachable goals that they then blame themselves for not reaching. This constant pressure to achieve perfection and the resulting inevitable failure leads perfectionists to be self-critical and self-blaming which results in lower self-esteem.

At some point, certain mental processes kick in unconsciously to preserve the perfectionist's self-image. The logic goes something like this:

> *'If I try hard and fail, that is worse than if I don't try and end up failing. In the former case, I gave it my best and failed. In the latter, because I really did not try, I truly did not fail.'*

Procrastination is used by perfectionists to try to convince themselves that shortage of time is the reason for the lack of perfection in the completed task rather than lack of intrinsic ability.

Perfectionism is really a tendency that exists on a continuum rather than being something that is either present or absent. People who suffer from extreme perfectionism are often depressed and withdrawn and usually need professional psychiatric help to overcome their low self-esteem.

At the other end of the continuum, many people feel that there are some areas that they ought to excel at and these are often tied up with professional pride and a positive self-image. In instances where performance in a particular task may highlight these areas people may choose to procrastinate rather than risk having their ability in these areas actually put to the test.

For example: someone whose positive self-image is based on being an expert negotiator may put off dealing with a particular supplier because they are afraid that they may come off second-best in this case and this will undermine their self-image.

This type of low-level or area-specific perfectionism is not uncommon and often leads to procrastination or task avoidance. If you feel as though you may avoid starting certain tasks because you don't think that you could do them perfectly then it is important that you face up to it and try to overcome it.

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The most effective thing you can do is to be clear about what your boss or co-workers would consider a successful outcome to look like. Very often this will be far simpler to achieve than your own idea of perfection. After all most of the deliverables that we are required to produce in the workplace need to fulfill a particular function and as long as they do so they are considered successful.

For example, it is far more important that an internal report provides accurate and timely information than how fancy it looks. If time does not allow for all areas to be thoroughly researched then you detail any assumptions you have had to make in the report. You can also highlight any areas you feel need further clarification.

Most decision-makers would rather have the necessary information on time and unadorned than the same information beautifully presented but a day late. It is important to remember that your report is only part of this process and the timeframe given is essential to the overall success of the larger picture.

Similarly, if you are responsible for dealing with a customer or supplier, does your boss really expect you to get all of the organization's demands met every single time with absolutely no compromises? It is all too easy to go into negotiations with a list of ideal outcomes and to imagine that unless these are achieved then you will have failed. The reality is that most things are agreed by compromise and your list of ideal outcomes may be wholly unrealistic.

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Key Points

- No one likes to be associated with failure, and fear of failure is a common trigger for procrastination.
- Be clear about what your boss or co-workers would consider a successful outcome to look like. It is very easy to set unrealistic targets for yourself.

3.7 You Are Afraid of Success

Fear of success may sound like an unlikely reason to procrastinate. After all, why would anyone fear success? This is one trigger that people find difficult to admit to because it implies that they are fearful of the consequences of their achievements. This goes against the accepted wisdom that achievements are positive things and by definition they don't come with negative consequences.

However, there are at least four valid reasons for fearing success.

Reward with more difficult tasks
Removes from comfort zone
Fear of Success
Invites greater expectations
Task has negative consequences - redundancies

Firstly, you feel that you will be 'rewarded' by being set an even more difficult task. For example, you feel that if you put in a great deal of hard work involving late nights, stress, and aggravation to bring a particular supplier into line then your reward will be to do the same thing to a supplier who has a reputation for being even more intransigent.

So why succeed? This is a perfectly reasonable viewpoint as the consequences of completing the task successfully may be unpalatable. This scenario is quite common in the workplace.

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Secondly, some people feel that each success only sets them up for the next challenge and invites greater expectations from their boss, co-workers, friends, or family. This reason is different from the first because each challenge they overcome appears to be part of an endless cycle rather than having a dubious 'reward' attached to it.

Thirdly, successful completion of the task may have negative consequences for other people. For example, it could lead to co-workers being made redundant or it could change working practices that people are comfortable with. It could undermine someone's reputation or make his or her efforts superfluous.

Finally, the material rewards of success may take you away from an area in which you are happy. For example you may enjoy the 'doing' aspects of your job more than the management aspects and feel as though success will mean that you are forced into spending more time on the management duties you dislike. Similarly, promotion may mean that you have to physically move to a new department or even a new city with all of the upheaval that will entail.

Key Points

- Successfully completed tasks may have consequences that are bad for you personally.
- This can be hard to admit as it goes against the accepted wisdom that achievements always have positive outcomes.

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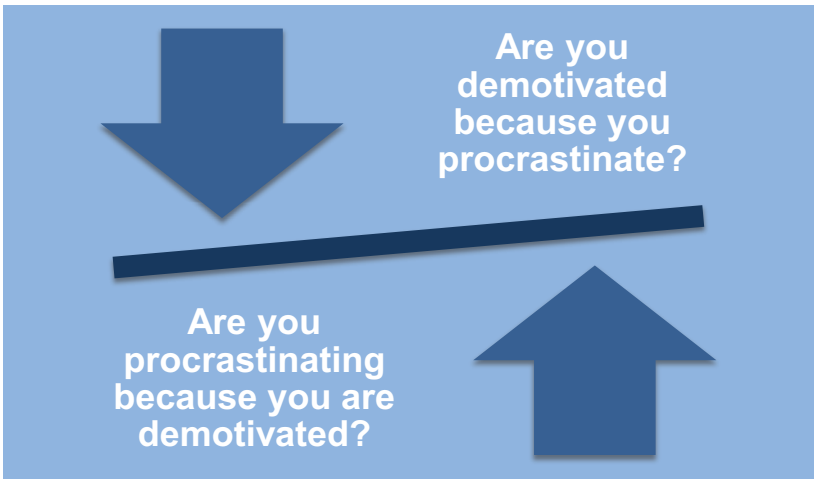
4 Summary

Procrastination has several possible triggers and it can be difficult to isolate the main cause in each case. It is also possible to confuse procrastination with a general lack of motivation and they are to some extent intertwined and mutually reinforcing. A lack of motivation for your work will encourage you to find reasons not to do it and this in turn leads to guilt and stress, which further undermine your motivation.



It may be impossible to determine which is the cause and which is the effect. Are you demotivated because you are a chronic procrastinator or are you procrastinating because you are demotivated?

In either case, procrastination will cast a shadow over your working day that will make it disagreeable and unfulfilling. In the longer term you will find that it damages your reputation as a productive worker and it can eventually lead to chronic depression.

Motivation is a complex topic and is difficult to measure because it is entirely subjective.

Procrastination on the other hand is easy to identify because it is always specific to a particular task and because it manifests itself as an inability to begin it or progress it.

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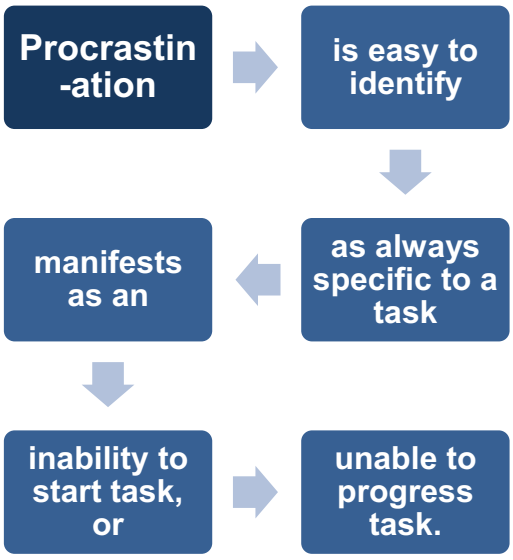

Consequently, your best course of action is to tackle each case of procrastination as it happens, as this is much easier than trying to increase something as nebulous as personal motivation. It is also likely that if you overcome your tendency to procrastinate then your personal motivation will improve as a direct result anyway.

Even though advice on how to increase your own personal motivation is beyond the scope of this eBook, there is one piece of advice that can help and is very easy to implement.

All of us have a conscious thought process which 'speaks to us' throughout the day. We do have control over it in as much as we can consciously influence it, but it also has a tendency to 'do its own thing' if we don't actively try to direct it.

Most of the motivational programs that have been developed involve re-educating this inner voice to be wholly positive. Whilst this does undoubtedly help, it is a lot of work because it takes a lot of practice to re-train it.

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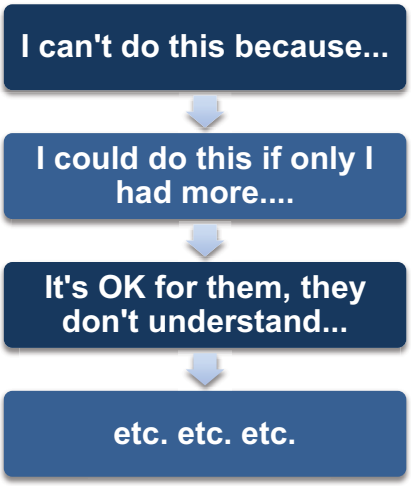
A much simpler tactic is to make yourself consciously aware of it particularly when it becomes overly negative. For example, you may find yourself thinking about a specific task in the following way:



These are just a few examples of negative task-specific thoughts, but you can probably come up with many others of your own.

The more you actively recognize and acknowledge that you have these thoughts, the less power they will have over you. You don't really need to explicitly challenge them because most of their influence on you derives from the fact that they have a propensity to multiply, reinforce each other, and seep unnoticed into your subconscious.

The effect of this over time is to lower your overall motivation and therefore increase your tendency to procrastinate. However, by actively admitting that these thoughts are occurring to you, you will rob them of most of their power.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you need to appreciate how difficult it is to overcome the habit of procrastination. The act of putting off something difficult and doing something more enjoyable instead will always provide an immediate reward.

Remember, though, you will only succeed by tackling the problem one task at a time.